

SCOTT NOEL

The Porch at 252 Pensdale, 2018
Oil on canvas, 34 x 54 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PETER HO DAVIES

Chance

There was a chance the baby was normal. There was a chance the baby was not. Fetus, he told himself.

There was a chance the fetus was normal. There was a chance that it was not.

She, he told himself. That was the result of one of the tests on the fetus.

There was a chance that she was normal. There was a chance that she was not.

Jesus.

No one could tell them the exact odds, but there was a small chance the baby was normal. A tiny chance. BB-sized. No bigger than a bean. And there was a large chance she was not. A full-grown, adult-sized chance. Big as a whale, big as a house.

“Stretch marks,” his wife said, gazing at the pregnant women across the waiting room like distant mountains. “That’s what I used to be afraid of.”

The chances of what was wrong with the baby being wrong with the baby had been a million to one.

Before the test.

Except there was still that tiny chance it was wrong.

A million to one was a figure of speech, he knew. The condition was so rare there were no reliable statistics. It was so rare the genetic counselor hesitated to put a number on it. *But if you press me.* Fifty or sixty cases world-wide. Ever. So rare that even after a positive test the doctors couldn’t be sure the baby had it. But they thought so.

He was a writer now, this father, but he had studied physics once—the science of the unimaginably vast and the unimaginably small, as one of his professors boasted—and still the numbers meant nothing to him. Unimaginable. He didn’t like that word—as a writer, had a professional dislike of it. Sometimes, he wondered if the baby would grow up to be a scientist. If the baby might make sense of the numbers. What would the baby say in his place, what would the baby decide?

The list of things the baby might have was four pages long. Single-spaced. The list was not numbered. When he cried and stared at it, blurred, it looked like poetry, free verse. Short lines, long lines, run-on lines. He couldn’t make any more sense of it than language poetry. He would

start to read, and a page in, or less, his mind would drift. Perhaps the baby would be a poet. He felt proud of himself that he wanted the baby to be smarter than him, better than him.

There was a chance the baby would be a poet or a scientist. There was a chance it would die in the womb, live a few hours or days or months in pain. Unimaginable pain.

It was June. The due date was December 7th. “A date which will live in infancy,” they’d joked.

Then it was July.

“Chances are, it’s not hereditary,” the genetic counselor counselled them. She deftly drew the elongated chromosomes upside down on a pad between them. “More likely a spontaneous mutation. A random copying error during meiosis—cell division.”

He nodded rapidly. He wanted to tell her he used to be a scientist.

“A freak,” he agreed, and her face, radiant with concern, flickered.

“Just bad luck,” she said with the infinite care of diagnosis. “Very bad luck.”

There was a day care center down the street. He jogged past it every day. The kids in the little playground. They’d thought it would be convenient, his wife and he. *Lucky*, they’d said.

They’d been used to thinking of themselves as lucky, until a couple of years earlier. They’d just bought their first house, taken a week to unpack, hung the last pictures, shelved the last books, gone away for the weekend. A pipe had burst, a \$1.99 plastic tube running into the base of the toilet tank. When they came home, water was running from the light fixture onto the dining table, like a fountain. Water was running down the bulging walls, it was running *behind* the paint like veins. For days they watched dark brown seams spread across the ceiling.

He’d felt like it was God’s fault. He’d felt as if it had been hubris to buy a house. It was the worst thing that had ever happened to them in their life together. And yet months later, when they had a much nicer house, they’d kidded each other, *Thank God for insurance*.

They had wanted the house to start a family. They had worried about a child drawing on the bright new walls.

He didn’t fault God for the baby. He didn’t believe in Him. Couldn’t imagine Him. The numbers were too big. They dwarfed God.

They couldn’t know—no one could—so they decided, this mother and father. Someone had to and, in the absence of God, it was them. They waited as long as they could. They waited for more tests. They waited with hope, but not hope of good news. The later tests couldn’t refute the old ones. The best the new tests could do was confirm the worst. So that is what they found themselves hoping for, as they held hands. The worst.

“Do you ever wish we hadn’t done any tests?” he asked her and she squeezed his hand so tightly he felt the bones must fuse.

The tests were inconclusive.

So they had decided anyway.

And that was all months ago. The baby would have been born by now. They’d have taken the baby home from the hospital by now. The baby’s grandparents would have visited by now. The baby would be smiling by now.

Months ago. They were licking their wounds. They were gardening for the first time in their lives, the sunlight heavy on their shoulders and necks. They were starting to tell people they might try again—trying out the idea of trying again, the words ashy on their tongues. They told their friends, the ones who, even though they knew the truth, said encouraging things like, “So-and-so had a miscarriage; they tried again.”

Once, in bed, in the dark, his wife had whispered to him, “*I wish we’d had a miscarriage.*”

It was just a thing people did, he knew. By the kind of chance he was growing numb to, the rhetorical figure was known as *meiosis*. Calling one thing something else, something safer. It made his wife furious, but to him it seemed only human, as if the events, the circumstances, so rare, so unheard of, shouldn’t have a name. Perhaps in ten years, he thought, it’s what we’ll say. “We had a miscarriage.” It seemed so easy to spare themselves explaining it again, over and over. Perhaps it was what they’d even say to another child, if they had another child. And then he knew it *was*

what they’d say, because how could you say what really happened to a child, your own child. If you had another child.

Cars with pro-life bumper stickers were everywhere on the roads that election year. *93% of women regret their abortion. If Mary was Pro-Choice there’d be no Christmas. What part of Thou Shalt Not Kill don’t you understand?* His wife tailed one to a convenience store, followed the driver, a woman, inside. “I wanted to tell her how she made me feel. I was going to, and then I saw her at the register. Know what she was buying? Lotto tickets.” They laughed until they cried.

The next week he saw one that read, *The Number of the Beast? 50 Million Abortions*, and found himself, despite himself, coldly comforted. For once the numbers seemed with him.

“Will you write about it?” his wife asked. It was his way of making sense. “You can, if you want.”

But he didn’t know how to make a story of it. The odds were too long. The case too special. “People would only believe it if it was true.”

“Nonfiction, then.”

He shook his head so slightly it felt like a shiver. “It’s too shameful,” he whispered. “Not *that*,” he called after her. “Too shameful to be this unlucky, I mean.”

He stared at the white of the walls. Ashamed, and ashamed of his own shame.

If he ever did write the story, he thought, there was a chance that it would be true, a chance that it would be not. A story, at least, could be both.

He rejoined his poker game. Not a game of chance, he knew. But now when he lost a hand, the winner apologized: *Bad beat, man*. The next week, he started playing online. He had always been a good player—good with numbers from his physics days—but he played badly now. Drew to inside straights, chased cards. He figured he was due some luck. But when he told his wife, when she saw the bills, she said, “You think that’d make up for it? You think that’d make it better?” And he quit. But he could tell she thought they were due something too.

There was a chance the baby was normal, he told himself. There was a chance the baby was not.

Even now they didn’t know for sure. But they could if they wanted. Somebody did, somebody somewhere in a white coat, in a lab. There had been more tests. Afterwards. *Post-*. Finally, the definitive tests could be done. They had agreed to them. *If it helps science*, they said. *If it might help other parents some day. If some good could come out of this.* There were results to these tests and they were conclusive. And they were out there in some file, just waiting to be asked for. “Whenever you want to know, or never,” the genetic counselor told them.

Were they those “other” parents now? Was it “some day”?

They talked about trying again, but they didn’t. Trying again, she said, just didn’t feel like anything they’d ever tried before. Instead, they talked about the results, whether they wanted them. They couldn’t decide about the results. They could decide about the baby, but they couldn’t decide about the results. It felt like a cruelty that the results existed. It felt like someone out there with a gun. They had agreed about everything, but now, sometimes, they disagreed.

She wanted the results, and he didn’t, just as once and for a year or two she’d wanted a child and he hadn’t. Perhaps she thought he’d come around again.

“Someone knows,” she said. “Some doctor, some technician. If they know I want to know.” It was the same argument she’d used when talking about finding out the baby’s sex. It had made sense to him then.

“I can’t bear it,” she said. “The not knowing. How can you bear it?”

He had been a scientist. Could have been one. It was the path not taken. At parties he used to joke that he was a “lapsed” physicist: *a bit like being a lapsed Catholic. They still feel guilt; I still feel gravity*. All he remembered of his physics now was the uncertainty principle, and the famous thought experiment about Schrödinger’s cat. The cat in a box with a vial of poison. The poison to be released by a random radioactive decay. According to the physics the decay might or might not have happened until the physicist looked in the box. Only then, only when observed, would the cat be finally either dead or alive. He was thinking, of course, of the baby in the box. Wriggling. Squirming. Heart racing. The gray, grainy baby from the ultrasound that his wife still had somewhere in the house, not exactly

hidden away, but put somewhere he wouldn't stumble upon, somewhere he'd have to ask her where it was, as if she were protecting it from him. When he imagined having sex with his wife again, he pictured the milky ghost of his penis, entering her swirling, snowy womb as if on the monitor at the doctor's office. It looked very cold in there.

He thought of the results. If they got them the baby would be normal, or the baby would not. Issue settled. But he couldn't do it, couldn't ask for the tests.

All he could think of was the old physics line:

How can you know the fate of Schrödinger's cat without looking in the box?

Throw it in the river. If it floats, the cat's a witch.

He wanted that box to stay shut.

"But why?" his wife implored.

He couldn't tell her.

Why, why, why, like steps, receding.

Not because if the baby was normal, it would make things worse (though it would).

But because, even if the baby wasn't, it wouldn't make things better. He didn't *want* to be relieved of this shame, when it was all he could feel, all he was allowed to. All he had left to remember her by.

That was why.

Because the baby was already dead.

There was a chance the baby was normal. There was a chance—tiny and miraculous—that they had killed their baby.

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Here was a thing about numbers, he thought for years after. The chance of a flipped coin coming up heads a hundred times is a half times a half times a half one hundred times. Astronomical. But on one flip, the first or the hundredth, the chances of heads are still just 50-50. The coin doesn't care how it's fallen ninety-nine times before. The coin doesn't give a fuck. That's what it is to be random. That's what chance is.

Peter Ho Davies's books include *The Fortunes*, winner of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and the best-selling *The Welsh Girl*, long-listed for the Man Booker Prize. His stories have appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, the *Atlantic*, the *Paris Review*, and *Granta*, and been anthologized in *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards* and *The Best American Short Stories*. A recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and a winner of the PEN/Malamud and PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Awards, he teaches at the University of Michigan. This story originally appeared in *Glimmer Train*, spring 2012. It now comprises the opening of a longer work in progress.

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Summer on Baker Street, 2008

Oil on canvas, 27 x 56 in



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